

Archives

Introduction

A fundamental yet often neglected obligation of government is to care for its historical records. Local public records can provide crucial evidence for understanding the basic organization of society, and their identification and maintenance is the responsibility of each county that generates or receives them.

When cared for and arranged using appropriate techniques, the documents, photographs and magnetic tapes that document the history of county government can be preserved permanently.

The term “archives” can have three basic meanings:

1. The noncurrent records of individuals, public agencies or private organizations which are preserved because of their permanent legal, fiscal, historical or aesthetic value — **the archival records**,
2. The administrative office or agency responsible for systems and procedures used to maintain and exhibit archival records — **the archival agency**, and
3. The physical building or repository, equipment and supplies necessary to house archival records under specified environmental conditions, **the archival facility**.

Objectives of an Archives

The objectives of an archives are to secure the transfer of inactive records which have permanent value and to provide for their preservation in an environmentally controlled facility that permits reference access.

The Process of Managing an Archives

Because archival records originate from many offices within a county, it would be most efficient for a single office, with appropriate staff and expertise, to maintain permanent records in a single location. Governing bodies should establish a new office or designate an existing office to be responsible for all county archival records.

Given the constraints on county resources, Boards of Freeholders should weigh options for establishing an archives with due consideration of costs and budgetary levels. Some possibilities

include:

1. Designating an existing office and a current staff member to be responsible for archival records. It is important that the designated staff member be able to bear any additional work which arises because of new responsibilities, and be given training opportunities in basic archival techniques.

County offices which can be considered are:

- a. **The County Records Manager** -- the foremost choice, records management is already responsible for active files management, semi-current records storage, and image-processing. Furthermore, since many records management programs grew up from archives, greater rapport and a professional support system is an advantage.
 - b. **The County Clerk's Office** -- usually the best choice in the absence of a professional records manager, the Clerk's Office is another central agency with considerable experience in managing records.
2. Creating a new office and hiring a full-time staff member to protect and preserve permanent records. (If no central records management office exists, a new county records manager/archivist could be responsible for county records from their creation through their preservation or destruction.)

Depending upon the administrative size of a county, and the volume of its permanent records, the new office can be:

- a. Established within a county to exclusively serve all county offices including the judiciary, or
- b. Established as an intergovernmental agency which serves all county offices as well as municipalities within a county (perhaps on a charge-back basis), or which serves two or more counties, etc.

Regardless of how a county archives is established, it must perform five basic functions: appraisal, accessioning, processing, and storage of inactive, permanent records, as well as reference services for the public.

Records Appraisal

Public records document the actions and transactions of government and must be retained for various lengths of time in accordance with administrative, legal and fiscal requirements. As a general rule, only three to five percent of an agency's records will have permanent value to the organization. Routine appraisal decisions have been greatly simplified by the development and publication of general and specific records retention schedules for use by state, county and municipal agencies and authorities.

As provided by the Destruction of Public Records Act (1953), the State Records Committee is

responsible for records retention schedules for New Jersey's public sector. Retention schedules determine the minimum amount of time a record series must be maintained to satisfy administrative, legal, fiscal and historical requirements, even when such requirements indicate that a record is designated for permanent retention. When such records are no longer needed by the office that created them, the county archives can proceed with accessioning.

In some instances archival officials may want to preserve a record permanently, even though its retention schedule allows for eventual destruction. For example, correspondence is generally scheduled for destruction after three years, but the correspondence of a particularly important officer — a county executive, for example — may be worthy of permanent retention because it provides important insights into the history of county government. Because of these considerations, county archivists should review any records destruction requests. Through the records disposal process monitored by the division, the State Archives may elect to review and appraise some county records in order to ensure that important historical evidence of value to the entire state is not being overlooked and destroyed.

In other instances, disposition may be listed as “archival review.” In such cases, archival officials, in cooperation with the county office that created the records, apply the principle of “intrinsic value” and use their best judgment to determine value. Records have intrinsic value when their age, physical form or other characteristics makes them valuable for reasons other than the information they contain. These records should be preserved in their original form. Records without intrinsic value, on the other hand, can be destroyed after being microfilmed or otherwise reproduced.

In general, archival officials carefully balance the need to preserve records of enduring value against the limits imposed by storage and personnel costs. Since records retention schedules only designate a minimum amount of time that records must be kept, county agencies and authorities are free to preserve records for as long as they want.

On the other hand, indiscriminate retention of records wastes tax dollars through excessive storage and maintenance costs (see section III), and defeats the purpose of comprehensive records management. Assistance in determining archival value of records is available by contacting the Bureau of Archives and Records Preservation of the Division of Archives and Records Management.

Accessioning

After records have been identified as permanent, their accessioning, or transfer into the physical and legal custody of an archives, may occur. Records transferred to an archives become the permanent legal responsibility of the archives. ***This transfer of legal custody is a major distinction between an archives and the records storage center.*** In a records storage center, only physical custody passes from the agency of origin; ownership is not affected. The originating agency may request the return of its records at any time, and it alone controls access to those records.

Records transferred to an archives are never returned to the agency of origin. Access restrictions that may be considered necessary for archival records must be mutually agreed upon by the originating agency and the archives prior to transfer. County government offices releasing custody of their permanent records to an archives should be aware of these distinctions.

The accessioning of records into the custody of a county archives should be documented by an "Accession Record" form which contains:

1. A statement indicating the retention schedule or criteria used in selecting specific material for permanent storage in the archives,
2. Identification of the office of origin,
3. Record series title(s),
4. Inclusive dates (or date span),
5. Volume in cubic feet,
6. Internal arrangement of files, including a note on their condition,
7. A brief summary of the informational content of the files,
8. A brief description of any finding aids, e.g. indexes and inventories, that may pertain to the records,
9. A brief statement of any access or use restrictions which may apply to the records, and
10. A statement acknowledging transfer of legal custody of the records to the county archives.

This form must be signed and dated by an authorized official of the transferring office and an authorized representative of the county archives.

Processing

Archival records deserve special care and attention to assure their preservation and usability. Processing of records accessioned into an archives involves four basic operations: preliminary inspection, arrangement and sorting, description, and conservation — i.e., preservation or restoration. A brief outline of these operations follows:

Preliminary Inspection

When records are ready to be accessioned, they should be checked for the following:

1. Are any of the records in urgent need of repair or treatment for water damage, mold or vermin infestation?
2. Are there file folders? Do the file folders need to be replaced with acid-free archival folders?
3. Are folder labels intact and self-explanatory?
4. Are the records arranged in some logical fashion?

5. Does the accession contain any material which is **not** archival: duplicate copies, nonpermanent records, printed reference materials, and extraneous matter?
6. Is there an existing finding aid -- index, inventory or list that will permit easy reference to the records, or will one have to be created?

General answers to these questions should have been noted while completing the accession record form. The concerns identified during this inspection can be used later in setting priorities for further processing.

Arrangement and Sorting

The primary principle of archival arrangement is to maintain the order of records as received from the office of origin. Such treatment allows records to reflect most faithfully the organization, functions and actions of the agency and officials that created them. By avoiding an arrangement which introduces external considerations, archival arrangement minimizes interpretive bias and allows a body of records to speak for itself.

The records of each office (County Clerk, Surrogate, Public Works, etc.) should be kept separately, constituting a record group. Records of administrative units within a major office may be filed as subgroups, and individual record series, as listed in appropriate retention schedules, should be arranged under the subgroups. Records must also be sorted to eliminate extraneous materials such as duplicates and nonessential printed material.

Description

Archival records should be briefly described so that users can more readily understand their contents. Such a description normally involves creating a finding aid or inventory, if one does not accompany the record series when it is transferred by its agency of origin. An inventory includes a brief history of the agency that created the records, as well as a summary of the kinds of information found in each record series and the order in which the records may be found. Agency representatives may be of assistance in preparing descriptive inventories, and their aid should be enlisted whenever possible.

Conservation

Although most county records are in acceptable condition and are maintained with diligence, some records may be subject to adverse conditions which hasten deterioration. Conservation of permanent records is therefore a continual concern.

Treatments must be applied to records that are brittle, torn, tattered, taped, infested or otherwise damaged. Moldy or insect-infested records must be segregated from an archives to avoid contamination of other records. Routine inspections of permanent records still housed by the originating agency can detect potential problems and suggest appropriate remedial steps needed prior to transfer to a county archives. Restoration of damaged permanent records before they are placed in archival storage minimizes deterioration of permanent collections, and helps ensure longevity. Proper storage is also crucial to the preservation of permanent records.

Whenever the need for conservation or restoration arises, county officials should call the division of contract with a private vendor. Some conservation techniques include, but are not limited to:

1. **Care of leather bindings** -- includes cleaning with chemical solutions, and dressing with an oil mixture, or rebinding where applicable,
2. **Paper surface cleaning** -- with powdered erasers or block erasers,
3. **Encapsulating documents** -- in mylar or other polyester film,
4. **Preservation microfilming** -- filming older, deteriorating documents as a means of generating durable working copies for researchers as well as archival master copies for permanent storage, (see section V) and
5. **Deacidifying manuscripts** -- neutralizing acidic paper by applying chemical solutions to prevent deterioration.

Conservation techniques require knowledge and experience in order to ensure that their application does not unwittingly hasten deterioration. For example, mending a torn page with common adhesive tape complicates the problem of permanent preservation by permeating the paper with acidic adhesives that eventually break down, staining and weakening the taped area and eventually destroying the document.

Storage Requirements

Because archival records have been selected for permanent preservation, extraordinary care must be taken with handling and storage. The continuous interaction between a record's medium — paper, magnetic tape and film, and the environment in which it is kept — temperature, humidity, light, and air quality, determines the rate of records deterioration.

Archival records must be kept in a manner that protects them from the principal hazards of:

1. **Excessive fluctuations of temperature and humidity** — High ranges of heat and humidity cause film emulsions to soften and magnetic tapes to become unstable. When high temperatures are combined with high humidity, conditions become ideal for microorganisms, insects and vermin, staining and other adverse chemical reactions in paper and leather. Moreover, fluctuations of temperature and humidity put stress on paper, bound materials and film emulsions by causing these materials to swell and contract with each climatic cycle. The potential damage to permanent records are broken bindings, brittle paper and unreadable film.

Preventive measures include installation of ventilation and heating ducts, air conditioners or dehumidifiers to remove excess moisture from the air and keep the relative humidity of archival storage areas within a range of 45 - 65 percent, and temperature between 65 - 70 degrees Fahrenheit, plus or minus five degrees, year round.

A battery-operated instrument called a psychrometer should be used from time to time to monitor humidity within the archives, and repository surveys should be completed during these periodic inspections.

2. **Infestation by insects and vermin** — The organic substances in leather, pastes and paper are a good source of food for vermin. Treatment will depend upon the nature of the infestation. Regular visits by an exterminator may also be necessary if the archives is prone to infestation. Preventive measures include periodic inspections of the facility and the records. Yet perhaps more importantly, problems can be prevented by thoroughly examining records when they are accessioned, prior to their placement in the storage stacks.
3. **Contamination by dust and other airborne impurities** — Dirt and dust pose a long-term hazard to records. Accumulated dust and debris can soil books and papers and provide a haven for the growth of insects and mold. Also, airborne pollutants eventually corrode record materials. In a storage area with high temperature and humidity, sulfides and nitrates from automobile exhaust can convert to sulfuric acid or nitric acid which destroy paper and leather.

Control measures include keeping floors swept, and shelves, books and boxes dusted or vacuumed. Other steps include installing air filters in heating or cooling ducts and placing dehumidifiers where needed.

4. **Excessive or improper handling** — Permanent records must be handled with the utmost care at all times. In many cases, fragile or damaged original records can be preserved by microfilming to archival standards and using microfilm copies for research use. Also, the presence of food, drink and smoking can be severely deleterious, and must be strictly prohibited in storage and reference areas.
5. **Fire** — Damage by accidental fires or arson can be a much greater risk in office space where smoking may be allowed in certain areas and combustible material is stored near permanent records.

Fire codes may require installation of automatic sprinklers, smoke and heat-detection systems, fire doors and walls, and metal conduit for electrical wiring. General periodic building and fire inspections are also recommended.

6. **Theft** — Burglary losses of permanent records can be much greater in office space where there is no special recognition of the security needs of archival records. Such losses can be prevented through controlled access with separate locks on all doors to the archival facility, and installation of burglar alarms and other intrusion detection systems. Other security measures govern patron use of reference areas.

Related concerns for providing county government records with security against various forms of deterioration or destruction are addressed in the Records Storage section (see III) and Vital Records section (see VII). It is important to note once again, however, that because archival records are permanent, their storage requirements are considerably more complex.

Office files and other unbound, archival materials, should be stored in standard letter-size or legal-size acid-free containers available from archival suppliers. Rubber bands, paper clips, file folders

and other foreign objects should be removed from the files. Large records may be stored in special oversize containers or wrapped in acid-free paper and stored flat on shelves or in horizontal map cases. Bound records may be stored vertically, unless size (more than eight inches), or damaged bindings dictate flat storage. Boxes and shelves should be labeled according to the record group, subgroup and series of materials they hold.

Reference Services

An area of an archives should be designated to allow the public to use the records. Ideally, such an area should be close to the storage facility for easy access, and should be open to the public during regular business hours.

Reference services provided to researchers consist chiefly of answering questions about the basic content and availability of records, and retrieving records from the storage area for examination by patrons. Archives staff should not conduct extensive research for any patron.

To minimize the risk of damage or theft, use of archival records must be strictly monitored. The archives should keep a daily register of all visitors. In addition to restrictions governing handling of records in storage areas, researchers should be forbidden to use pens or to place their briefcases or other containers on or near research tables. Also, patrons should never be allowed to remove records from the search room or transfer them to other researchers.

Transfers to the State Archives

Counties may sometimes request transfer of their permanent records to the State Archives. The Bureau of Archives and Records Preservation will accession local records on a selective basis provided that they have statewide significance. Such records become permanent state property and are maintained in the State Archives. It is important to note that N.J.S.A. 47:2-3 requires transfer of certain municipal records, such as those generated by extinct municipalities, into the State Archives.

Summary

Archives should be established by county governing bodies to provide for the permanent preservation of records of enduring historical value.

The process of managing an archives begins when archivists select records worthy of permanent preservation. Decisions to permanently preserve records are based upon an appraisal of their value as historical information or evidence, or because of their intrinsic value, i.e. their age, physical form or other characteristics that requires preservation of originals. This process has been simplified by the publication and updating of records retention schedules that designate permanent records and indicate other records which should be reviewed for placement in an archives.

The originating agency transfers ownership to the archival agency with proper documentation. Once accessioned, records are processed: they are arranged and described by inventories or finding aids and are inspected to determine conservation or restoration needs. Finally, records are securely stored in an environmentally-controlled facility to minimize deterioration, thereby insuring preservation while providing controlled reference access to the public.

The division offers assistance free of charge to county agencies and authorities. For information or assistance, call the Bureau of Archives and Records Preservation at (609) 292-6260, or write: New Jersey Department of State, Division of Archives and Records Management, 185 West State Street, CN 307, Trenton, New Jersey, 08625.